

Being an Early Career Feminist Academic: Global Perspectives, Experiences and Challenges, edited by Rachel Thwaites and Amy Pressland

Young scholars tell it like it is but is knowledge of replaceability a bar to change?
asks Finn Mackay

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- [Finn Mackay](#)

It is sad that this book is so relevant. Indeed, it is depressing that it has to be written at all. Yet it is necessary and urgent that the realities and contradictions of surviving as a feminist academic are told, so that collectively we can begin to address the current situation and share responsibility for changing it. This edited volume brings together testimonies from feminist early career academics in several countries, including Australia, Sweden, Russia and the UK. The editors, Rachel Thwaites and Amy Pressland, define “early career” as the transitional years between the award of a PhD and the securing of stable academic employment – an uncertain trajectory, of course, and one that can end up taking one’s whole career! The category of feminist is less clearly defined, although all the contributors identify as such and apply themselves to established areas of feminist scholarship, such as intersectionality, living motherhood while engaged in academia, emotional labour and sexism in the workplace.

From Australia, Lara McKenzie’s interviews highlight the reality of life as an aspiring academic, involving full-time work in temporary teaching contracts or administrative roles at a university, alongside the writing of journal articles or research funding applications during evenings and weekends. Short-term contracts and hourly paid work can preclude applying for a mortgage, getting out of an overdraft or adding to one’s family with pets or children. In one account, an interviewee reflects on his collection of easily portable houseplants and antiques, an attempt at homely permanence within a cycle of rented accommodation.

A particularly moving contribution is the autoethnography from Agnes Bosanquet, who charts her journey through motherhood and PhD completion, including caring for her baby through critical illness. The negative reactions she received to her feminist research methods highlight the glacial pace of change in

academia and the resistance to knowledge producers who refuse to worship the false prophet of objectivity.

The editors and contributors are quick to point out that the experiences recounted here are not unique to academia. Academics are not alone in facing the uncertainty of zero-hours positions, in being shunted from one three-month contract to the next or in accepting underemployment in ancillary roles just to be physically near the career that they would actually like. The book sensibly ends with a lively chapter on practical strategies for resistance, but I feel that this could have been more of a feature throughout, perhaps asking each author to provide her own suggestions.

This text is a starting point: in beginning to solve problems, we first have to name them, and the collectivising of struggles is an important act in itself. I have to admit to a certain level of cynicism as to what can be achieved, however, as all of us, even on comparatively stable contracts, live and work with the brutal reality of our own replaceability. As several of the chapters in this volume so succinctly discuss, this awareness limits what we are prepared to challenge and it reacts unfavourably with the surrounding fog of that most well-worn neoliberal deceit: the story that structural unfairness does not exist, and that the only thing holding you back is yourself.

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